

Too Many Trucks, Too Little Parking

New Rules Mandate Breaks, but Few Spots Are Being Built; Driver Deaths Cast Glare on Shortage

By Betsy Morris; *The Wall Street Journal*

The last time Ashley Boeglin talked to her truck-driver husband, Mike, he was heading toward Detroit late one night in June to drop off a load of coils at a ThyssenKrupp steel plant.

They discussed their favorite subject—the new baby on the way, “what we needed to get done, what we looked forward to,” recalls Ms. Boeglin, a physical-therapist assistant and athletic trainer in Newburgh, Ind. Then they said goodbye and agreed to talk again in the morning.

But the next morning, Mr. Boeglin’s body was found in his silver Freightliner, burned beyond recognition. The truck had been set afire and left less than 150 yards from the factory gate, according to local police, who say they suspect robbery was the motive. They have made no arrests.

Mrs. Boeglin says she doesn’t know why her husband didn’t stay at a truck stop, but he probably didn’t want to spend money on fuel to get to one or pay an overnight parking fee. She believes that if he had been invited inside the factory’s fenced-in parking lot, “I wouldn’t be going through this.”

But most shippers don’t allow truck parking, including the ThyssenKrupp plant. “We were deeply saddened by these events,” a spokeswoman said in an email, but the plant “clearly defines” the hours it’s staffed to receive deliveries to ensure safety, and it discourages parking in vacant lots nearby.

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Mr. Boeglin’s death has cast a harsh glare on the severe shortage of accessible parking for truck drivers. Trucks transported 9.7 billion tons, or 81% of the \$682 billion of 2013 freight revenue, according to the American Trucking Associations. Yet there aren’t nearly enough legal, safe and well-lit parking places where truckers need them most. Meanwhile, safety regulators have increased the number of times that drivers must stop, park and rest.

The parking shortage dates back at least two decades, but it’s getting worse. There were 2.3 million registered Class 8 trucks, with a gross weight of 33,001 pounds, last year, according to the American Trucking Associations. While that number hasn’t increased in recent years, cheaper fuel is likely to change that. Shippers are already switching to trucks at a higher rate than to rail, according to a recent survey by Wolfe Research.

When truckers along Interstate 5, which runs the length of California, were surveyed in spring 2012, 70% said they had tried to stop at a truck stop on the route but found it full. More than half said that happened every other day, according to the study by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley. Another study found about 300 truck-parking spots on part of I-40 through Arizona and New

Mexico for the more than 10,000 trucks that passed through daily, according to the Federal Highway Association.

In the Northeast, “All the truck stops fill up early,” says Debora da Rocha, who is on the road for four months at a time hauling general freight. “If you don’t find a place by 4 p.m., you’re in bad shape,” she says.

There were 2.3 million trucks on U.S. roads in 2014. While that number hasn’t increased in recent years, cheaper fuel is likely to change that. PHOTO: KYLE GRANTHAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Even if you do, many truck stops are so crowded they don’t provide much respite, truckers say. Early one morning last August, Dave Della Maggiore’s truck was rammed repeatedly when a tired, angry trucker couldn’t find space at a truck stop in Clines Corners, N.M. The trucker was trying to squeeze in beside him and did about \$8,000 of damage, says Mr. Della Maggiore, who hauls freight for D&D Transportation in Gooding, Idaho.

When sleepy truckers can’t find a legal place to stop, many of them either push on or park illegally in secluded areas behind grocery stores, the corners of shopping malls or freeway ramps and shoulders. That’s a common sight if you look for it, says Andrew J. Warcaba, a Dixon, Ill.-based management consultant who redevelops commercial rest areas on toll roads.

An informal Web survey in 2013 drew an outpouring of responses from nearly 4,000 truck drivers. Nearly 40% said it takes them, on average, an hour or more to find parking for the night. About 28% said they regularly or occasionally stay on freeway ramps; 52% said they pull up behind shopping centers, and 45% hunt for places like abandoned gas stations or vacant strip malls.

The survey was spearheaded by Hope Rivenburg of Fultonham, N.Y., who has worked with federal transportation officials and members of Congress to get more parking for truckers ever since her husband, Jason, was murdered in 2009. He was on his way to deliver a load of milk and had parked at a deserted gas station in Calhoun County, S.C.

Her efforts were key to the passage of a section of the federal transportation bill known as Jason’s Law, which made truck parking eligible for federal funding, in 2012. But truck parking has had to compete for funding with pressing projects like fixing bridges and expanding congested highways. “Nobody is focused on truck parking,” says Mrs. Rivenburg.

Government transportation officials have studied the issue for more than two decades. Every few years, “they do reports and then put them on the shelf,” says Lisa Mullings, chief executive of the National

Association of Truck Stop Operators.

Trucking is a competitive, thin-margin industry with lots of stakeholders—shippers, trucking companies, developers and transportation and safety officials. But there's no single entity responsible for truck-parking facilities, according to a study by the National Academies' Transportation Research Board more than a decade ago.

Meanwhile, safety regulators are requiring truckers to rest more frequently so they won't fall asleep at the wheel. By law, they must stop at least once every eight hours of driving and quit for the equivalent of a night after a total of 11 hours. "It's a huge added stress to a driver who is trying to focus on operating safely," says Ryan Bowley, government-affairs director for the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association.

The parking shortage is also a safety hazard for regular motorists. Parking on freeway ramps is usually illegal, but many police officers don't like to ticket truckers, forcing them to drive when they're sleepy. Some are hopeful change will come. The truck-parking shortage ranked sixth in American Transportation Research Institute's list of top 10 issues critical to the industry in October. The advisory committee to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration put it in a wish list for congressional spending on surface transportation.

Mrs. Mullings of NATSO says trucking companies have become more focused on the issue as they compete to hire and retain drivers. She says she believes "the fastest, most effective way to increase truck parking is for the trucking industry to demand it from the truck stops" with whom they negotiate fuel contracts. Parking could be part of the deal, she says. "The private sector is more often than not able to do things more cheaply than the public." One Iowa truck stop recently increased its truck parking to 900 spaces from 800, she says.

Darrin Roth, vice president of highway operations for the American Trucking Associations, hopes that another study, called for under Jason's Law and due out in the next few months, will make a difference. It will be the first to zero in on the biggest problem areas. "That at least allows us to have the conversation with Congress and allow them to understand the extent of the problem," he says.

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